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Regendering care or undoing gendered binaries of parenting in contemporary UK society?

A commentary: Abigail Locke

In their paper, Boyer, Dermott, James & MacLeavy (in press) discuss the rise of fathers in primary caregiving positions within the United Kingdom following the recessions from 2008-09 and 2011-12. They do so with a comprehensive overview and discussion of the economics of care, gendered binaries of care, welfare spending cuts and policy interventions to support 'hard-working' families in austere times.

Boyer et al set out to examine a number of research questions: "what are the multiple factors, motivations and institutions that facilitate this nuanced 'regendering of care' phenomenon in different national contexts? What is the role of economic crisis, labour market change, austerity and economic recovery in shaping household decision making around gender divisions of care? How can we best evidence this potential regendering of care phenomenon empirically? And what are the implications of these changes for repositioning the mainstream 'work-life' balance research agenda?"

Considering these research questions, I first turn my attention to the exploration of factors, motivations and institutions involved in this 'regendering of care' that are discussed in the paper. Boyer et al draw on the literature from both North America and Scandinavia to contextualise fathering practices, gender and caring. They discuss briefly the issue of fathering quotas and the impact of 'use it or lose it' schemes. Given the current changing context in the United Kingdom of Shared Parental Leave, I would suggest that the paper could go further to locate their claims within the changing context (and low uptake) of this

leave, considering the wider societal and structural issues that impair greater co-parenting and regendering of care work within the UK. This would sit well within their remit and work to further ground the work in contemporary fatherhood. Given their later suggestions for developing work within this area, a study considering the impact of Shared Parental Leave on the ‘regendering of care’ could offer wider insight.

Moving on to the second question concerning the role of economic crisis, labour market change, austerity and economic recovery in shaping household decision making around gender divisions of care, I would concur with many of their observations. In an analysis of the depiction of stay-at-home-dads in the British press (Locke, 2016), I noted how the press portrayed the recession as leading to an increase in the number of stay-at-home-dads. This debate followed what the press termed as the “Clegg gaffe” where in 2009 he noted how the economic crisis provided men with the “opportunity” to reinvent themselves as stay-at-home-fathers. As I discussed in this piece, the media response was immediate and openly critical of Clegg’s ideas and much of this criticism centred on notions of masculinity and what it means to be a father. The strength of the backlash is indicative of the intersectional nature of fatherhood, instead of the hegemonic version that is typically presented as the norm (and arguably the one that is picked up in policy related to parenting). As contemporary research demonstrates, fathering discourses differ in terms of intersections with social class (Dolan, 2014; Shirani, Henwood & Coltart, 2012), age (e.g. Eerola & Huttunen, 2011), ethnicity (Hauari & Hollingworth, 2009), sexual orientation (Johansson, 2011) and paid work status (Haywood & Mac an Ghaill, 2003). In addition, all of these differing issues may themselves, in turn, be intersecting with wider notions of masculinity.

Considering the economic crisis further and its impact on the rise of stay-at-home-fathers, Boyer et al locate this paper within this discourse to examine the move to a regendering of care. They note that the recession was called the “mancession” in some quarters due to the types of industries that were initially hit by the economic downturn. Wall (2009), for example, was one of the first to coin this term. However, the “man-cession” trope has been reinterpreted by feminist scholars such as by Williams & Tait (2011), who suggested that women, in particular mothers, were themselves heavily disadvantaged during the “mom-cession” (see also Negra & Tasker, 2014).

Regarding their theorising of the rise of the stay-at-home father, their discussion of how the category has been defined in different studies is useful in both considering different definitions and the framing of the issue in research findings. These categories are also contextually bound as different nations maintain (and fund) their child care differently. For example, in some countries, full-time working parents and state childcare is the norm, whilst others fall on more traditional models of care with a stay-at-home parent. Within the UK, parenting and carework shift often in line with paid-working responsibilities and there were 7.9 million families with dependent children in the UK in 2014 (ONS, 2015). Whilst Boyer et al’s paper notes the rise of stay-at-home fathers since the global recession, (although on ONS 2016 figures, this number appears to may have peaked), if the argument is to be framed within economic terms, I would suggest a greater attention could be paid to the ways in which families are negotiating these gendered binaries of care. Within the UK, there is a dual expectation embedded in work-family policy that parents are both economically active in the labour market and caring for their children (Fagan, 2014). As Yarwood & Locke (2015) note, this is inherent throughout political rhetoric of ‘hard working families’ where ‘work’ is constructed in financial, instead of caregiving terms. The UK is an interesting context in the

makeup of its workforce where whilst there is an almost even gender split, it contains a large number of families that contain a part-time worker. These working practices are commonly termed 1.5 worker families (Prince Cooke, 2011; Sayer and Gornick, 2012) with typically the mother taking on the part-time role. With the focus of the paper on the rise of stay-at-home-fathers, I would suggest, given that economic factors appear to impact heavily on family caregiving practices, that a larger discussion of how families are negotiating the division of care on a micro level would add to the aims of this work. Yarwood & Locke (2015) for example, noted that even in families where parents had equal working status, or the father took on more of the child-caring responsibilities (in a reverse 1.5 family), the mother would be the one expected to take the time off work to care for the sick child. This can have knock on effects with, what Williams (2010) has termed the ‘maternal wall’ of discrimination as employers’ construct working mothers as having less capacity to work and more likely to take time off work due to caregiving responsibilities. Similarly, societal gendered parenting norms reinforce this as Williams (2010) further notes that men with caregiving responsibilities have experienced discrimination from employers who refuse them the right to leave work when a child is sick.

Finally, when considering the final research question of what are the implications for repositioning the work-life balance agenda, Boyer et al offer a discussion of how some men are changing working practices in order to take on a great childcare role (the ‘superdads’, Kaufman, 2013). It was refreshing to see the class based position of these concepts being considered as much of the contemporary work on ‘involved fatherhood’ has a middle-class focus inherent within it, and other, less privileged groups may be constrained by financial decisions and resources. Similarly, their request for a more detailed understanding of the barriers to care for men and the need to reach an understanding of the micro-politics of

gender-caring decisions is appropriate. If, as their paper claims, that “the economic downturn...may have opened up the possibility for more progressive arrangements of work and care”, then a more intersectional understanding of the decisions that families are making with regards to combining work and childcare is timely.

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